

XXXII.—*Field-notes on Birds from the Western Pyrenees.*

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DURING the month of April last, I was able to spend a fortnight at Argelès-Gazost, in the lower portion of the Department of the "Hautes Pyrénées," and to devote nearly my whole time to the observation of the birds of the district, in furtherance of the researches of Mr. Howard Saunders in the years 1882, 1883, and 1896. His papers (*Ibis*, 1884, pp. 365-392; 1897, pp. 64-89), supplemented by that of Mr. H. M. Wallis (*Ibis*, 1895, pp. 64-85), give so good an account of the avifauna of the western section of the chain, with full lists of the species, that some apology is due for traversing once more such well-trodden ground; but Mr. Saunders made his headquarters at St. Jean de Luz, and from that centre worked up both the French and Spanish side of the mountains, while I devoted myself to the country above Lourdes, and especially to the valleys extending to the Spanish frontier beyond Cauterets and Gavarnie. Mr. Wallis visited the locality in May and June, and his paper gives no information concerning the earlier part of the season; it may therefore be of interest to the readers of our *Journal* to learn what species of birds were present and what absent in the foothills at the time of the spring migration, in a year when the snow had covered the ground for more than four consecutive months and was particularly late in melting.

A visitor to the districts above Pau in April is at once agreeably struck by the abundance of bird-life compared with its deplorable scarcity in many parts of France; not only are the numbers of individuals considerable, but little fear is shown of man, from which the inference may be naturally drawn that persecution is less felt there than elsewhere. As regards species, more might doubtless have been recorded a month later, as not a few of the birds' customary breeding-quarters were inaccessible at the time of my visit, a circumstance which I regret the more as it precluded the observation of many of their most interesting habits.

Comparatively few members of the *Turdidæ* were to be met with near Argelès-Gazost in April, but a most noticeable

feature was the great abundance of the Ring-Ousel (*Turdus torquatus*), which was passing on migration during nearly the whole of the month. It breeds in the vicinity, as Mr. Wallis saw young on the wing above Gavarnie by June 16th. Large numbers are shot for the table while on passage, and appear in the *ménu* under the name of "Pie de Mars," the chief hunting-ground at Argelès being the hill directly opposite the town. The Blackbird (*T. merula*) was not uncommon in gardens and shrubberies, but the Song-Thrush (*T. musicus*) was only once observed, and the Mistletoe-Thrush (*T. viscivorus*) was conspicuous by its absence. Two birds, which I took to be Fieldfares (*T. pilaris*) were observed flitting along a fir-wood near the top of a snow-capped hill, but the Rock-Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) was never seen, though a careful look-out was kept. Probably it had not reached the hill-sides as early as usual. Redstarts (*Ruticilla phœnicurus*) were passing through Argelès from April 7th to April 10th, after which date none were observed, though individuals nest in the neighbourhood; while the Black Redstart (*R. titys*), which Mr. Saunders reports as leaving St. Jean de Luz by April, had not yet arrived at its upland haunts. Nor were Chats of any species to be seen either in the valleys or on the hill-sides above them. The Redbreast (*Erithacus rubecula*) was resident, yet rather scarce; the Nightingale (*Daulias luscinia*) was never heard, though it is found at an altitude of 5000 feet on the Spanish side of the range; but the Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) and the Sardinian Warbler (*S. melanocephala*) were extremely abundant and were evidently preparing to breed, the cocks, when not already paired, keeping up continual contests for the hens. *Reguli* were fairly common, but it was very difficult to be certain of the species without the aid of a gun; I succeeded, however, in finding a nest of the Fire-crest (*Regulus ignicapillus*), which contained four eggs at the end of the month. It was rather smaller and more compact than that of the Gold-crest, and was placed under the end of a small spruce-fir branch. The Willow-Wren (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) and the Chiffchaff (*P. rufus*), which were heard on several occasions, seemed to

have taken up their abode in the lower valleys for the summer.

I was much disappointed not to meet with the Alpine Accentor (*Accentor collaris*), which undoubtedly is not uncommon near the loftier peaks, as, for instance, at the Port of Gavarnie; it is true that deep snow blocked all paths to the heights, but this should naturally have driven the birds to somewhat lower levels. The Dipper of the Pyrenees frequented nearly every stream and was abundant in suitable localities, being found up to the highest points accessible in the month of April; but either it had not begun to breed or the nests were unusually difficult to find. The Long-tailed Tit of the district (*Acredula irbii*) was sufficiently common in small flocks, which were to be seen feeding among the branches of the spruce-firs, but were not breeding; *Parus major*, *P. ater*, and *P. caeruleus* were observed in a few places, but no other species of the genus was met with. *Egithalus pendulinus* was only identified at Argelès-Gazost, where it was not uncommon in the Park. The Nuthatch (*Sitta caesia*) was by no means rare where park-like conditions prevailed, while the Wren (*Troglodytes parvulus*) and the Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*), though less plentiful than in Britain, occurred in various situations. Two species of Wagtails were breeding in the valleys, *Motacilla melanope* being particularly abundant up to the very foot of the higher mountains and *M. alba* somewhat less so at the lower levels. The former in several cases had hard-set eggs. The Meadow-Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) was occasionally seen, but no Shrikes or Flycatchers had arrived. On the other hand, Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) were in evidence by April 7th, and Martins (*Chelidon urbica*) by April 17th; *Cotile rupestris*, moreover, was even thus early occupying its breeding-haunts in the gorges of the Caunterets Valley, though it did not appear to be nesting. The Greenfinch (*Ligurinus chloris*) was more common than the Goldfinch (*Carduelis elegans*), but both species were far outnumbered by the Serin (*Serinus hortulanus*), which was one of the most abundant birds at Argelès, where it was always to be seen flitting about the gardens from tree to tree, or flying high in the air for short distances,

while uttering sharp notes upon the wing, not unlike those of the Siskin under similar conditions. These little birds seemed to be much attracted by the rough-cast walls of the houses facing the gardens, to which they used to cling for several minutes, apparently with the object of securing some kind of food. The only Sparrow identified in Argelès was our common species (*Passer domesticus*), which was plentiful; but by far the most abundant bird in the whole district was the Chaffinch (*Fringilla cœlebs*), the only Finch which appeared to be breeding at this early date. Linnets (*Linota cannabina*) were still flocking in the fields in large numbers, in company with Yellowhammers (*Emberiza citrinella*) and Sparrows. A pair of Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra*) was noticed in a large spruce-fir wood on the top of the hill opposite Argelès, and the Meadow-Bunting (*Emberiza cia*) was seen singly or in pairs, especially in the valley on the way to Caunterets. I was somewhat surprised to find no Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) in the district, but still more to note at so late a period of the month the entire absence of Choughs (*Pyrrhonorax graculus* and *P. alpinus*). No doubt snow was still lying in the gorges which they frequent, but it must be quite an exceptional experience to fail to meet with them in April. On the other hand, a flock of some eight Jackdaws was seen circling around near the Cirque of Gavarnie, and I should certainly have taken them for Choughs had they not been so near that their appearance and cry were unmistakable. Only one Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) was noticed, though it is a common enough bird as a rule; but Magpies (*Pica rustica*) were extremely abundant and ranged almost up to the April snow-line. They evidently had eggs towards the end of the month. The Raven (*Corvus corax*) seems to be rare, but the Carrion-Crow (*Corvus corone*) was seen, in pairs or singly, on several occasions, both in the higher and the lower valleys. All enquiries respecting the Nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*) were fruitless.

One of the most abundant species was the Green Woodpecker (*Gecinus viridis*), the laugh of which was heard in all directions in the lower valleys, though breeding had not yet begun; the birds were very tame and easy of observation,

and the colour of the back seemed rather more grey than in British specimens. The Wryneck (*Iynx torquilla*), recorded from Argelès-Gazost by Mr. Saunders as early as March 26th, had possibly passed on to more congenial haunts, as its cry was never heard. The Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), on the other hand, was constantly heard after the middle of April. Not a single Owl was to be seen or heard either by day or by night, but the peasants asserted that the "Grand Duc" (*Bubo ignavus*) haunted a large fir-wood on the hill opposite Argelès. Griffon Vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) were seldom visible, though at times they appeared even over the town; they are said to breed near Arrens on the French side of the mountains, but the natives cannot, of course, be relied upon, and the snow prevented any attempt at reaching the locality. Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) were pretty common, especially on the cliffs towards Lourdes; but Buzzards and Kites were conspicuous by their absence, though they occur in the main valley as high as Argelès. No other members of the Falconidæ were seen.

Wood-Pigeons (*Columba palumbus*) were somewhat uncommon, but both this species and the Stock-Dove (*C. œnas*) must be extremely abundant in autumn, to judge from the numbers which are said to be taken about September at St. Pé and other places between that town and St. Jean de Luz, noted for their "palombières." Boys are sent up the trees, and throw sticks when the flocks appear. The birds are said to follow the sticks, but it seems more likely that they swoop down to avoid them. As a result they are caught in nets stretched along or near the ground. M. Peyrafitte, the well-known hotel-keeper and sportsman of Argelès, was particularly anxious to impress upon me the fact that the flocks at St. Pé arrived from the south, and that the smaller Doves were much less numerous than the larger. About April 12th the whole district swarmed with Turtle-Doves (*Turtur communis*), apparently on migration. The Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*) is still shot in the highest woods from time to time, but appears to be decidedly rare. The Water-Hen (*Gallinula chloropus*) was observed on the Gave de Pau at Argelès-Gazost.